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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 001290

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SUBJECT: MARCH 14'S WINTER OF DISCONTENT

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Disillusionment among March 14 Christians is expanding. March 14 Secretary General Fares Souaid recently expressed deep concern about the direction of the movement, fearing Syrian pressure on March 14 leader and Prime Minister Saad Hariri would lead to its disbandment. Publicly and privately, all four "poles" of the March 14 Christians -- Lebanese Forces (LF), Kataeb, Armenians and "independents" -- complain that they have been slighted vis-a-vis Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun and his allies in the distribution of ministerial portfolios, as well as generally ignored over "Hariri's capitulation" to Hizballah, the "arms of the resistance," and to Syria. They say they will not boycott the government, however, and some are even optimistic that the new government will work well within its limited mandate. But March 14, in the words of LF leader Samir Geagea, "is on a break." End summary.

MARCH 14 SECRETARY-GENERAL WORRIED ABOUT THE FUTURE

¶2. (C) PM Hariri is under pressure to "dissolve the Islamo-Christian coalition of March 14," according to March 14 SecGen Fares Souaid. After Saudi King Abdullah's visit to Damascus, Saudi Arabia began to push Hariri harder to accommodate Syria's demands. Souaid claimed that as late as December 8, Hariri told the Saudis he would cancel his upcoming trip to Damascus if it was predicated on the disintegration of March 14. Souaid accused Syria of trying to reassert its control over Lebanon. He claimed that the Saudi financial support to the March 14 Secretariat and Hariri's Future TV and affiliated newspapers had stopped in September. Souaid was nervous that Hariri considers the lack of money as only a "technical problem" that will be solved "tomorrow." "I am afraid it's a political problem ... we can only continue like this until Christmas," Souaid assessed. He urged U.S. intervention with the Saudis to keep Lebanon out of Syria's hands. "Saad wants us (March 14) around to take a clear stance on Hizballah's arms without disturbing his relations with Syria," he worried.

¶3. (C) In addition, when we saw him December 9 Souaid lamented the breakdown of his secretariat. The March 14 political parties have downgraded their representation in the weekly meetings, and Amine Gemayel's Kataeb pulled out completely in November, he said. Gemayel told the media in November, "We remain in contact and cooperation with our allies, but as long as we do not get an understanding regarding the (political and administrative) coordination, we quit the March 14 coalition." In early December, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea grabbed headlines with his announcement that March 14 was "taking a break." He added that March 14 is losing importance as a political

organization, while remaining a powerful set of ideas. Like Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Amine Gemayel before him, Geagea told the press, "I am still with Saad." Souaid insisted, however, that Geagea is "still involved" in March 14.

PAROCHIAL COMPLAINTS COUPLED WITH TANGIBLE CONCERN

¶14. (C) The complaints and criticisms of March 14 Christians increased in the weeks between the announcement of the formation of the cabinet on November 9 and its qualified agreement on a draft ministerial statement on December 2. Each of March 14's Christian groups were dissatisfied with the distribution of cabinet portfolios. Kataeb complained about not receiving the education portfolio, LF for not getting a "service" ministry, and the Armenians not having a ministerial portfolio at all. In addition, the Christians were particularly displeased with the language in the ministerial statement that preserved "the resistance." Kataeb MP Sami Gemayel summarized the sentiment when he said, "Saad made a grievous mistake by legitimizing Hizballah's arms in this (ministerial statement); it is worse than post-Doha, there's no way forward." Many of them also blamed Hariri personally for acceding to Aoun's demands in the cabinet formation process, thereby strengthening Aoun's public standing in the Christian community at their expense. Even the Armenian parties that have been in an alliance with the Hariri family since 1992 said they and their principles were betrayed, but according to MP Sebouth Kalbakian, Hanshaq's representative to the secretariat's weekly meetings, Hariri "is the PM now, we have to go with him."

SOME MAKE LEMONADE WITH THEIR LEMONS

¶15. (C) Boutros Harb, an influential independent MP and new minister of labor, had a pragmatic outlook on December 7 for the new government and March 14. He said that without Walid Jumblatt, who he claimed is prepared to move his allegiance fully to March 8, March 14 no longer has an actual majority. Nonetheless, he said, March 14 "is still going; not united, but still going." Harb attributed part of the loosening of March 14 as a political organization to Hariri's premiership; "Saad is moderating his positions to be acceptable as prime minister." Harb was optimistic that the new government would make progress on tangible reform issues, such as social security. But larger, more sensitive issues, such as Hizballah's arms, Syrian interference in Lebanon, and an eventual peace with Israel, require regional and international intervention, he asserted. Similarly, March 14 MP and parliamentary secretariat member Serge Torsarkissian said "the small issues -- electricity, health -- we can play around with, but the outside is needed for the real problems."

COMMENT

¶16. (C) March 14 has lost some of its luster since its creation in 2005. The discontent shared by the coalition's Christian factions is affecting both March 14's actual and perceived unity. March 14 as a political entity is appearing fairly tattered right now, but March 14 as a political concept retains the support of its cross-confessional popular base. As Souaid said, "the people of March 14 are more March 14 than its leaders." And as Harb suggested to us earlier this week, March 14's Christians are likely to stay together -- and with Saad -- because they have no real alternative.

DAUGHTON